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Erika Loerner FriedI
Western Michigan University

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Erika Loeffler Friedl

Center for the Study of Ethics in Society
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49008

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Erika Loeffler Friedl
Western Michigan University

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HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Human Rights issues are surrounded by great silence in the social sciences. Academics don't discuss them much. Scholars seem to be ill at ease with them, unless they belong to the small circle of activists who don't talk as much as try to do something about real people in distress. As an anthropologist and Middle East scholar, I am curious about this silence and about our defenses against professional involvement in human rights issues.

Judged by the scholarly documents we produce, most of us seem to dissociate professionally from the burning life and death issues facing people in the world today. We seem to be blissfully oblivious of the fact that the comfortable island of relative peace and prosperity we inhabit and take for granted is both shrinking and ever harder to defend against what amounts to an onslaught of distraught people within our own society (which conceptually we hide behind depersonifying terms like crime and poverty), and from the outside in the form of increasing pressure from refugees, illegal immigrants, demands for our

military and economic resources. We don't face these issues in the scientific community nor do we take up the challenge to our understanding of "human" they pose. Of course, there always are some among us who do, and there are many more who become personally involved in down-to-earth problem solving and relief work, especially when it concerns the groups they are studying, but even most of these social scientists do not transcend the separation of theory and practice: their activism is rooted in caritas, and their professional concerns are rooted in the theories of their disciplines. Not even the current "hot" discourses in anthropology, the discipline that ought to reflect our global outlook on humanity sharper than any other, have much, if anything, to contribute to theorizing the current human condition. The postmodern word-spinners have declared modern society (ours, they mean primarily, but also the global village) a postmodern one. It is marked by dislocation, alienation, multiculturalism, world-system economies, widespread borrowing of uprooted cultural items, romantic longing for an idealized past, and increasing anhedonia (Denzin 1991: 5). Beyond this definition, however, the postmodern discourse cannot

handle postmodern society theoretically because it lacks a matrix of standards as a background against which a society and its culture could be observed. Even as description, it stops before it gets to the really ugly parts, indeed, unable to call anything "ugly".

There is also a personal reason for my interest in the human rights movement. As I was using the various theoretical approaches of the day in the social sciences in the course of my professional life, I came to develop a good ear, I like to think, for hearing critical appraisals of the cultural and social dynamics by the members of the groups I studied in Iran. Theoretically, two levels of analysis ought to be kept separate in such appraisals, even if practically this sometimes is next to impossible to do: what I, the politicized outsider, perceive to be an injustice, let us say, or a pain, and what the people themselves see as injustice, or pain, might be different. But awareness of our ethnocentrist tendencies can be cultivated, as can caution in interpretation. For anthropologists this kind of ethnocentrism rarely is a problem. The real problem arose for me when I tried to describe and to present the contradictions, the suffering, the discontent which individual

people, or whole groups such as women, for example, expressed about their condition. Increasingly over the past decade or so, so many of my colleagues developed a deaf ear to this criticism from within, and an outright hostility towards any kind of criticism of "native" cultures, that some of us have become very curious about what is going on in our profession that allows a politically correct, truly ethnocentric, so-called multicultural perspective to preempt serious analysis. For example, one of the very few marxist-feminist North Africanistists recently decided not to talk any more about cliterectomy, which is widespread in the area she studies; at the 1993 Middle East Studies Association Meeting she declined to talk about ethnographic issues at all. She wants to talk only about general topics and theory because her politically correct conscience does not allow her to potentially "misrepresent" the people she knows better than probably anybody else in the world; because her discussion of genital mutilation of women might lead to the culture being criticized for misogynist practices; and because she does not want her knowledge to be potentially used for any political or cultural interference. Well, talk of the good old ivory

tower as the new postmodern heaven!

All our standards by which we, as scientists, could describe the discontent and injustice we see, have eroded. That painful recognition led me to look at the Bill of Human Rights as the only universally accepted standard for human dignity and human conduct left to us. Presently, Human Rights are the only basis on which new theories of the human condition, which after all is the core of the social sciences, could be built, yet this basis is heavily attacked.

The Virginia Bill of Rights in 1776 laid the foundation for a controversy about human rights that is not settled yet. It did so with its insistence on the essential freedom of the individual - one is born free - which leads to the claim to natural, unalienable personal rights.

This idea is both the inspiration and the burden of Human Rights as declared in 1948 by the United Nations. Ultimately, HR are based on the same liberal-humanist assumptions about the unitary nature of the subject and conscious subjectivity of the individual that had inspired Virginian citizens (followed by French citizens with the Declaration of Human and Citizens' Rights of 1789) almost 200 years earlier.

This intellectual heritage is a burden

today because philosophically it places Human Rights into a quintessentially western discourse, easily identified as ethnocentric to the ancient core, and, in its claim to universality, also as hegemonic. And what is worse today among intellectuals striving to walk at least in the shadow of politically correct ideologies than to be labelled western, ethnocentric and supportive of hegemonies of whatever kind?

In 1947, the American Anthropological Association passed a resolution on human rights, drafted by on of its most esteemed members, M. Herskovits, to be submitted to the UN. Among others, it reads: "In the main, people are willing to live and let live, exhibiting a tolerance for behavior of another group different from their own, especially where there is no conflict in the subsistence field." This means, equality and tolerance and good will for all is kind of a universal common sense, the anthropologists tell us. Into this idyll, however, came a "point of view...that emerged from the history of Western Europe and America," where "economic expansion, control of armaments, and an evangelical religious tradition have translated the recognition of cultural differences into a summons to action." This summons culminated

in so-called action anthropology in the 'sixties, and is with us still today in several forms. The engagement on behalf of natives was deemed necessary to counter "philosophical systems that have stressed absolutes in the realm of values and ends. Definitions of freedom, concepts of the nature of human rights, and the like, have thus been narrowly drawn....The history of the expansion of the western world has been marked by demoralization of human personality and the disintegration of human rights" (meaning the "natural" human rights, rooted in the primordial, self-regulatory goodness of small groups,) "among the peoples over whom hegemony has been established." (Executive Board, AAA 1947: 540-541).

Quite logically, after all this rhetoric, the Executive Board rejected the idea of a declaration of universal human rights based on the Western democratic individualistic model in its recommendation to the UN. In much of the non-western world, anthropologists argued, the individual is not a free agent in our sense, not an autonomous subjectivity loosely connected to other autonomous subjectivities, but is firmly integrated into a group and derives self-understanding from membership in the group.

Stressing rights for individuals based on our notion of freedom thus alienates natives from that which gives them structure and meaning. It dehumanizes and colonializes them. Instead, the Executive Board recommended in a roundabout way what Herskovits (1942: 560) succinctly had said earlier: "...the concept of freedom should be realistically redefined as the right to be exploited in terms of the patterns of one's own culture". In other words, killing a person ritually or otherwise in our culture is a crime, but killing a person in the name of sacrifice to a God among the ancient Aztecs is a custom to be honored. Individual suffering is made plausible and thus acceptable within the context of its culture. Culture is privileged over the individual; cultural relativism reigns supreme on the level of groups, vague as the term "group" is; and by implication the West with its ethnocentric "common sense" ideology of personal autonomy and rights only meddles and muddles in the native scene, and is best kept out of everything. The anthropologist is left at the gate to the world as the guardian of all cultures and of Culture.

The Human Rights Declaration of 1948 (which did not follow the anthropologists'

recommendation but based human rights on rights of the individual to life, speech, religion), thus from the very beginning had an uneasy relationship with the experts on the human condition in the social sciences.

Much to their credit, many anthropologists disagreed with this then professionally correct stance. They pointed to the massive atrocities in Europe at the time, which, indeed, on a personal, individual basis, challenged cultural relativism as nothing had ever challenged it before. (The convenient way out of this dilemma was a linguistic sleight of hand, so to speak: "...our sense of 'culture'," a prominent American anthropologist, William Howells, wrote in a letter to the AAA in 1947, "is not synonymous with 'political system', and is not to be confused with it. Otherwise perverse people can say we are stating that Franco is just as good as anybody else..." (Washburn 1987: 942). Franco is bad, the Italian culture is beyond good and evil, and fascism concerns only politicians; incredible as this sounds today, then it worked.)

Still, cultural relativism as an assumption (it never really amounted to a formal scientific theory), reemerged from the turmoil unharmed,

clinging to the claim of scientific objectivity, a solid anti-western bias, and propelled by unbounded openmindedness and protectiveness towards non-western societies that were seen by anthropologists as victims of western interference. If this sounds like several contradictions, so be it: each decade has its politically but not necessarily logically correct way of going about the social scientific enterprise. An anthropologist at that time was defined as "a person who respects every culture-pattern but his own" (Herskovits 1951: 23). This definition works just as well today: Cultural Relativism derived then and still derives much of its power from anthropologists' and social scientists' hostility towards the values of their own society.

By the 'fifties, anthropologists quite generally felt a collective guilt for the injustices native peoples suffered at the hands of the westerners. They were fed up with colonial-imperialist schemes that had used (and thus implicitly misused) anthropologists in the 'thirties and 'forties, and with the economic exploitation of non-western peoples in an imperialist context. From the 'fifties onward social scientists increasingly supported and

defended just about everything "native", from local beliefs and customs to indigenous political power hierarchies, but especially "the new representatives of the societies for whose cultural values they had fought so hard" (Washburn 1987: 940). Mindful of "groups" as the locus of culture, they rooted for independence movements with a touching belief in the good will of the leaders of the newly emerging states and the common-sense power of culture. But when one after the other of these leaders "defined freedom in such a way as to cause millions of their members to flee if they could, or ... to be slaughtered in situ (Cambodia, Uganda, Ethiopia at that time), anthropologists faced a theoretical and practical dilemma." Adding embarrassment to the dilemma, many refugees fled to Europe and the US whenever and by whatever means they could, into the very eye of all oppressive evil, if one believed the social scientists. Something was very, very wrong: people whose identity was derived from being members of a cultural group, very obviously were suffering as individuals under the weight of oppression by their own people. The micro-level of the everyday practices of a culture inserted itself on the macro-level of

global cultural processes as conceived by social scientists.

The dilemma led to a profound questioning of the relevance, the heuristic propriety of a relativist stance. For anthropologists, always at the front of the relativist way of looking at the world, the AAA 1947 injunction that individuals are free only within the "freedom" of their own societies became uncomfortable. It dawned on us that some indigenous cultural practices are detrimental to the welfare of individual members of that culture; that some cultural practices, no matter how well integrated, traditional, deep-rooted, and commonsensical to the people, probably are not worth being supported given the human suffering or environmental destruction they entail. Rapid population growth, for example, is a case in point.

The governments in many of the new nations (of Africa, for example), no matter what they called themselves ("democratic" was popular because it promised access to aid money from the West) in many instances had to be recognized as representing the interests of either their elite or else of one or the other particular ethnic group, much to the detriment by neglect

or hostility of other ethnic groups. Not just individuals suffered in the name of their own culture and local customs, but whole social strata and ethnic groups suffered. Moreover, the interests and "freedoms" of different ethnic groups within a region or a nation often were mutually exclusive to such a degree that supporting one as legitimate by its own cultural traditions automatically implied denying others. Ethically and theoretically, we were in a pickle, and are there still.

At the same time, the analytic and conceptual apparatus social scientists used to describe and compare cultural features was wholly nomothetic, located within the western, hegemonic scientific discourse: kinship terms, concepts to capture religious experiences, models of interpersonal relationships, indices for folktale motifs were cast in social-science language (which is English) or in French-English-derived neologisms, in the attempts to bring order into the confusing variation of all the relative cultural particularities out there. The scientific language, just as the scientific enterprise, is truly hegemonic, decentering all other indigenous discourses, but it tends to be seen globally as a non-political, a necessary if

not beneficial hegemony, and as such is not questioned very loudly outside Euro-America. It allowed anthropologists to claim to be both activists working at the grassroots who know good from evil, committed to supporting the causes of the people they know more about than anybody else, and generalist, "objective," scientists who stood above the muck and squalor.

Yet, in all this fumbling and groping, we had some impact on the discussion of human rights: our longstanding insistence on context, on cultural geography, environment, evolution, on systems and interrelationships, on the holistic view, however compromised by relativism, added sophistication to the construction of "peoples" and of culture in the general intellectual and political frame in which, among others, human rights are discussed. And our focus on groups, ethnic, religious, or whatever, and their rights to articulate their own concerns and preferences as a group without undue uninformed interference, helped to broaden the UN's narrow and ethnocentric vision of the autonomous person - or so we hope at least. I like to think that the general public wouldn't know let alone care at all that Yanomami in

northern Brazil are gunned down by illegal goldminers on their reservation, or that Kurdish villages are gassed by Iraqi troops, or that indigenous peasants in Mexico are oppressed, if it had not been sensitized to the concepts of ethnicity, identity, and the right to cultural self-articulation over the years.

A third impact on human rights of the trying-to-do-right-by-everybody attitude of the experts on culture was on their content. The first declaration of 1948 (30 Articles in all), which concentrated exclusively on individual rights in a generic sense, was supplemented several times. In 1966, at the height of cultural relativism, it came to include economic, social, and cultural rights as well as civil and political ones, in two separate pacts. Several so-called Conventions have followed since, such as, in 1979, on discrimination against women. In fact, the doors to HR inclusion opened for so many different interest groups and concerns, that, as one observer at the HR Conference in Vienna this past June put it: "The UN Pacts have led to a clear watering-down of the concept of human rights: they grant all world citizens a pseudo-entitlement for everything that is good and dear" - without hope for deliverance, is implied. Even

a "decent" standard of living is now seen as a basic human right (Unterberger 1993: II). Indeed, new rights are still being advocated, encouraging expectations that cannot possibly be met anytime soon.

The US has not signed any of the Conventions and has bad human rights records in regard to prisons, capital punishment, and race relations, but, alas, "The West", with all its poverty, glitter, cut-throat competition, injustices, loss of soul, human rights violations, and general malaise is still, as in the 'forties and 'fifties, it seems, the place where just about everybody wants to go who isn't here already. The extent of this wish is believable only to those of us who travel widely in the so-called Third World, and to those who follow statistics on asylum petitions and on illegal immigration.

The theoretical discussion of this issue, which ought to be done by social scientists, is similar to 50 years ago: social scientists, motivated by a collective distaste for hegemony and imperialism, and weary of being used to support relations of domination, counsel to stay out of everything: we should not interfere in the internal affairs of another nation, and this interference includes human rights, because we

are a bad influence and because we are hopelessly compromised by our own failures. Yet, at the same time, we should advocate unlimited tolerance and the provision of unlimited social, financial, political space and resources in our midst for those who are voting with their feet to escape their own cultures or governments. Obviously, we can't do it right by our own conflicting standards.

But it gets worse.

In this program of non-interference we are supported by many governments in developing nations, especially those with bad human rights records, with only a slight twist: they agree with us that the West should stay out of a nation's internal affairs unless invited, and this includes, emphatically, use of Human Rights as a pretext for interference. But upon request the West should find unlimited resources for humanitarian and economic programs in the poor nations, because it is a human right of every person to be fed. The African Charter of Human Rights, for example, passed in 1981, contains duties as well as rights: among others, every African is obliged to guard and to strengthen what is called positive African cultural values (Cohen 1989: 1015). Anything

coming from the outside thus is to be judged against the so-called positive indigenous values, and to be rejected if these values are contradicted. African delegates to the HR Conference in Vienna quite clearly used this to argue against Human Rights in the context of the treatment of prisoners and of women. The imposition of Human Rights was interfering with positive African values, they said. The Islamic Republic of Iran, which officially is honoring the Bill of Human Rights and the Conventions signed by representatives of the previous regime, maintains against all criticism that the human rights of Muslims are the most comprehensive possible because they are rooted in the Qoran, the word of God, and that therefore the Human Rights of the United Nations are subsumed under their own. I have professional colleagues in US, "objective scientists", who loudly agree with this stance. For other Muslim fundamentalists, for example in Algeria, democracy itself is un-Islamic because every Muslim is part of the *umma*, the Community of the Faithful, which requires of its members to fulfill duties rather than to insist on rights. In an absolute and universal sense, only God has rights. Saudi Arabia, for example,

subscribes to this argument: practically, there Human Rights are immaterial; they are used mostly as a political tool in discussions with the West. Delegates to the recent World Conference who are committed to HR saw it as their greatest challenge to halt the global slide into cultural particularism in regard to human rights, and to face the danger posed to the claim to universality by Third World nations on the basis of cultural autonomy vs. western hegemony. Only at the very last moment did the Assembly of Delegates muster enough voices to reaffirm Human Rights as we know them, including their universality, and including women. (There was a danger to separate women from "human" and to draft a separate Bill of Women's Rights. This would have opened the door very wide to the sanctioning of culturally-specific but nevertheless detrimental practices regarding women.)

Where do the social sciences fit in this?

The social sciences meanwhile have gone postmodern. And in very good faith too. Because have we not inflicted ourselves on defenseless natives, using them for PhD dissertations and our own professional advancements? Have we not been studying

down, pulling rank, as it were, on the voiceless others in small places? Have we not pretended to ask and observe "objectively" in the name of science while we have, at best, "created others", our objects of inquiry, as non-us? And then created texts to which the natives could not possibly relate? Have we not privileged some voices over others? Men, for example, over women, the headman over the village idiot, a shaman over his or her client, the historical records of an earlier imperialist administration over the tales of a local story-teller? And have not we all, except the truly enlightened, been after some kind of "truth", which is the ultimate postmodern blasphemy? Appearance notwithstanding, this is not an absurd overstatement. Our books and Journals are filled with texts of soulsearching of this kind. It looks absurd only because I put this earnest, pervasive, self-indulgent language into the context of the happenings in the world that concern human rights.

Some concrete data are in order now.

Today in the world, about 200 million children under the age of 15 have to earn their own living. (International Labor Organization Report 1993, quoted in Der Spiegel 1993: 186;

this figure, the ILO says, could be three times as high.) Anti-Slavery International counts some 25 million children working as slaves in India, some 8 million working in forced labor in the Andes, millions as debt-slaves in India and Pakistan. Nobody even attempts to count the children working as domestic servants in Africa, in the Middle East. Children work as miners (Columbia), carpet weavers (India, Iran, Pakistan, among others), fruitpickers (Central America, US) porters, beggars (intentionally crippled or starved by their organizers); they cut sugar cane, roll cigarettes and cut matches (India), harvest pesticide-covered and highly allergenic flowers such as Jasmine (Egypt), ride racing camels in Saudi Arabia, all for the lowest, if any, wages, and usually alienated from those too by their parents or their managers. Children are also sold as organ donors and into prostitution, by the thousands, if not tens of thousands, annually. No one knows how many are killed. How can this happen? Is not taking care of one's offspring one of the common-sense, general attributes of humans, an adaptive feature bred into us in the course of our evolution? A professor of Economics and Labor Law in Bangkok (Der Spiegel 1993: 196) is

quoted as saying this about it: "Childhood, as it is understood in the West, is superfluous from the point of our culture and a squandering of resources." In other words, our notions of the dignity and needs of children is on a par with wasting energy so typical of the West generally. The Declaration of the Human Rights of the Child was passed in 1979. Now, 14 years later, concerned lawmakers in Thailand are trying to get an emergency law on the books which would make it illegal to employ children under the age of 12, but they are not optimistic about its enforceability. Hearing native defenders of cultural particularity like this Thai professor, it is little wonder that this is the least enforced or even talked about of all the Human Rights declarations. By not talking about children, by not figuring them into our theoretical explications on the human condition, we condone this silence - in the name of what? Cultural diversity? I have no answer, but I can tell you that the silence on children in anthropology, sociology and political science is thundering.

The death penalty, which violates a Human Right, today is practiced in over 100 nations, including the US, which finds itself in

the fine company of only six other (all Third World) nations as far as killing people under the age of 18 is concerned. Amnesty International estimates that some 17000 executions were carried out in 1992 worldwide, most of them in China and Iran.

The number of indigenous ethnic groups, almost 5000 worldwide, is decreasing rapidly - genocide, done swiftly, goes almost unnoticed (such as in the Bangladeshi Chittagong Hills, in Indonesia, among South American Indians here and there. Cultural Survival, an anthropologist-founded and -run publication, keeps track of this.)

Rapes of millions of women annually are not even counted; rape as a tactic of war is not considered a war crime. I am not talking only about Bosnia; according to Human Rights Watch Groups, in Peru women are raped by government security forces; Burmese soldiers rape ethnic minorities as a matter of strategy, so do Indian soldiers fighting an insurgency in Assam (Gossman 1993:3). In Muslim societies under Sharia law, a raped woman can be punished severely for fornication unless she has witnesses testifying that she was overpowered.

Domestic violence against women is the

major cause of injury and death among women worldwide, but falls in the "cultural autonomy" category of domestic privacy in most nations.

Trafficking in women (the sex-trade is a multi-billion dollar enterprise for its organizers), and forced prostitution are so widespread, especially in SE Asia, that it no longer can simply be ignored completely (Barry 1992:1f.). The Women's Rights Project researching the topic in Thailand, for example, estimates that some 20,000 Burmese women alone are in the Thai prostitution trade-circle. Girls are lured to Thailand by agents who prefer the young ones because they are likely to be AIDS-free and easy to control. A popular way to recruit prostitutes in Asia is by gang-raping a young girl, who then is abandoned by her people. (The harrowing Jugoslavian movie, Time of the Gypsies, illustrates this procedure for a different part of the world.)

Some 10 million people are refugees, most of whom live in abject poverty. Often now, individual nations both create and receive refugees (Iran and Afghanistan, for example), which complicates the picture.

More men in percent of the total population are imprisoned in the US than almost

anywhere else (and more still in Michigan). Amnesty International, one of the oldest and most respected Human Rights Watch organizations, has amassed staggering information on the mistreatment, torture, murder of prisoners worldwide.

Hunger, illiteracy, and poverty-related diseases are on the rise everywhere.

All of these conditions and atrocities are covered by Human Rights Conventions. They should not happen in countries signatory to them, or if they did, the responsible governments should be reprimanded. Double standards in this regard are so disparate, that Austria, for example, which signed the very stringent European Human Rights Bill, was cited 22 times at the European Court in Strasbourg since 1958, for violations such as keeping arrested people too long in - safe and comfortable - custody, while the US and others keep on executing prisoners, and the richest nation in the world does not house and feed a quarter of its children.

Anthropologists are trained to observe the human condition any place in the world they can get to. One would think it reasonable to assume that anthropologists see and report the hardships,

injustices, oppressions, deprivations, that individuals as well as groups suffer at the hands of their families, their fellow group members, their leaders, or outsiders. Reports on genocide, refugee squalor, slavery, rape, sex tourism, are too massive, too universal to be chalked up against exceptional circumstances which we could safely ignore. But, with exceptions, it is not western anthropologists who do the reporting, but members of charitable institutions, interest groups, NGOs, inspired by and connected to the Human Rights. The anthropologists and other social scientists who have the academic floor at the moment are not looking there.

Where are they looking? They look at themselves and passionately argue the fine point: the researcher's relationship with him/herself in the field; and whether one's professional ethics allow one to talk about marital rape, or listen to any critical voice without listening to the other voices too. At the recent AAA Meeting (November 1993) a whole panel was devoted to papers by couples talking about their experiences while doing fieldwork together. It was in a big room, and packed, and there was much joking and merriment. It was a huge

success. Reporting on and analyzing one's own experiences (what I call writing ego-graphies) is done in the name of doing justice to one's ethnographic partners, the "others", whom one does no longer dare simply to represent or to paraphrase, let alone compare to others. Generalizations are out, and reader-response, rather than the author, is responsible for the creation of meaning. Anthropologists and many of their fellow social scientists now are in the business of "giving voices". The voice of a woman who is beaten by her husband in Egypt, let us say, should, of course, be heard, but so should her husband's. Both have a story, both are right. The woman hurts, but this is her culture, isn't it? The husband and wife perform their marital drama according to the rules and possibilities of their culture - who am I, the anthropologist, to dare evaluate? We are in the grip of an ultrarelativist mode of perceiving the world against which pales the good old cultural relativism a previous generation had labored under. Only some stances are "safe" to take: anti-US, anti-Israel, anti-western Europe. Thus, it is politically correct and seen as relevant to report at the Middle East Studies Meeting (November 1993) the linguistic

ramifications of the Turks' second-class treatment in Germany, but not that Turkish dissidents in Turkey disappear, or that Kurds are slaughtered there. Reports of Israeli settlers going on a rampage against Palestinians are welcome, but not of Palestinians killing their own dissidents. At the 1992 MESA meeting, a Moroccan woman lawyer who reported critically on some women's legal issues in Morocco, was politely reprimanded by a US anthropologist and a sociologist in the audience (both women) for her ethnocentrism and lack of understanding for the cultural context. And she a professional Moroccan woman herself!

In such an intellectual climate Human Rights are more an embarrassment than an inspiration. Again at the AAA meeting in 1993, the Human Rights Commission within the Association, formed only in 1988, called a forum to discuss the situation in Bosnia: it had a smaller audience than had the panel on couples doing fieldwork in cute places I mentioned before. Nothing came of it in terms of resolutions, and quite some time was used to discuss the correct channels a recommendation has to travel to reach the Executive Board of the AAA. At this and the regular Commission

meeting, I had the very distinct impression that everybody was pussyfooting around hot issues, afraid to take any stance that might conceivably be seen as taking sides.

And I have to admit that it takes strong guts to face the world of Human Rights abuses. Listening to testimony-session after testimony-session about these issues at the World Conference in June, I literally felt sick often, and totally unprepared conceptually to deal with what I heard. Yet, I have been a practicing anthropologist for 30 years.

At the Conference, which lasted three weeks, there were so few anthropologists as to cause comment. I paid my way there myself, and had offered the AAA to be their delegate, but they had declined, saying a member of their Human Rights Committee wanted to go. If anybody actually did go, I never saw that person in the three weeks I was there. Another anthropologist, a Middle East scholar I know, attended the Conference for a few days but not so much as a scholar than as a member of an interest group working in Peru: she got interested in the HR situation in Peru after she had adopted two Peruvian Indian children. For a short while a German anthropology student

was working there for a NGO concerned with the right of peoples to feed themselves. Beyond this, the field was left entirely to the nearly 2000 NGO activists downstairs in the Conference building, and to the official UN delegates upstairs. The scholars stayed home. The official delegates talked relativism often; I think they dearly love us because we give them the script for explaining that human rights violations in their countries are not violations but cultural traditions. The NGOs, I must report, can't understand why we chose to abandon the just causes of the common people we have made it our professional goal to study, in the name of nouveau relativism. I was asked about this a dozen times. The director of a woman's NGO (Sisterhood is Global, with advisory status to the UN) told me that she had just about given up on listening to social scientists in the US at all. She cannot use what they offer. As academicians, we have very little, it seems, to contribute to the debate on the universality and validity of the concept of human rights, to the prioritization of human rights, to the implementation of Human Rights. We deny the challenge to our old notions of the intrinsic value of culture, to the good in us all, by the

massive, human-made suffering in the world. Three years ago, the AAA Commission on Human Rights adopted what it calls "a broad working definition of human rights: Anthropology as an academic discipline studies the bases and the forms of human diversity and unity; anthropology as a practice seeks to apply this knowledge to the solution of human problems. As a professional organization of anthropologists, the AAA has long been, and should continue to be, concerned whenever human difference is made the basis for a denial of rights - where 'human' is understood in its full range of cultural, social, linguistic and biological senses." (Anthropology Newsletter vol. 34, no 3: 1,5.) Obviously, good will and some concrete questions are alive in some of us at least, but as long as there does not ensue a lively debate in the profession, and a broad willingness to dare to transcend the conventional, politically correct ways of dealing with what is "human", I see us march straight ahead into never-never land.

CONCLUSION

With our postmodern abandonment of the

enlightenment paradigm we have also abandoned attempts to talk about universal attributes of "human", including the subjective and objective sufferings people endure out there. With this I do not imply a call to arms - in fact, there are quite a few committed social scientists working in NGOs and humanitarian organizations - but rather I deplore our inability, our obvious unwillingness to face the Human Rights issues, theory, practice and violations alike, and to theorize the human condition on this level. After 60 years in the business of analyzing people as socio-cultural beings we still cannot come to terms with universal attributes of what it means to be human. We, the inventors of "society" and of "culture," have not kept pace with their obvious transformations in the wake of population explosions, the arms explosion, and consumerism on a global scale. Despite all the postmodern and deconstruction rhetoric, we do not face the de facto deconstruction of the concept "human" which we have taken for granted for 100 years and have reified in our social sciences. We have not abandoned the unilinear, essentially evolutionistic model of the development of societies, of knowledge, and of culture being able to cope with challenges. We

do not know how to handle the issues we cannot ignore without abandoning relativism, and thus, we seem to think, any claim to making science. Instead, it seems, we chose almost collectively to look elsewhere, where it is safer, to the quaint, the abstract, and the historical, leaving the field to charities and to those people whose commitment and engagement precludes theorizing the problems they are trying to solve. What are we afraid of?

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BIOGRAPHY

Erika Loeffler Friedl was born and raised in Austria, having received her Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Mainz in Germany, 1964. She has over 6 years of ethnographic fieldwork in Iran with a special emphasis on women's issues and has written various articles on the topic that have been published in both books and professional journals. Her most recent publications include the book Women of Deh Koh (Penguin Books, 1991), and In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Postrevolutionary Iran (J.B. Tauris and Syracuse University Press, 1994) which she co-edited with M. Afkhami. She has been at Western Michigan University since 1967 and currently serves as Professor of Anthropology.

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